

Excerpts from

Operation OverFlight

by

Francis Gary Powers and Curt Gentry

Holt, Rinehart and Winston N.Y. 1970

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wing and in the tail. The other jammed the canopy so I couldn't get out. But each time I managed to make it back. And, while I was working at high altitudes, where the aircraft was most temperamental, there were, I'll frankly admit, occasions when I was scared. But my confidence in the U-2 remains unshaken. It was and still is a remarkable aircraft, one of a kind.

I only wish there were more of them around.

In 1963 I received the first of what was to be a number of rude awakenings.

You're going to have to make up your mind, Powers, the general said. If you want to go back into the Air Force, you'll have to do it soon.

With nearly twelve years toward retirement—

Five and a half, he corrected me. Your time in the CIA won't count.

On joining the U-2 program in 1956 I had signed a document, cosigned by Secretary of the Air Force Donald A. Quarles, promising me that upon completion of service with the agency I could return to the Air Force with no loss of time in grade or toward retirement, my rank to correspond with that of my contemporaries. This had been a major factor in my accepting employment with the CIA. The same was true of the other pilots, all of whom had signed the same document. A number of them had already returned to the Air Force under those conditions.

The general knew this. But there had been too much publicity about my case. Although they would let me reenlist at comparable rank—an old captain, or a new major—they would have to renege on their promise regarding my CIA service counting as time toward retirement.

I was being penalized for doing my duty, for having spent twenty-one months in a Russian prison!

He was sorry, but that was the way things were.

I could have fought it, I suppose. However, as with my agency contract and numerous other documents I had signed, the CIA retained the only copy. To contest this, I would have to use other pilots as witnesses. Some of them, I was quite sure, wouldn't lie. But it would be damn rough on them. My attempt to obtain what I had been "guaranteed in writing" might mean the Air Force would penalize them, too.

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Excerpted From: Operation Overflight by Francis Gary Powers
with Curt Gentry, Holt Rinehart and Winston N.Y. 1970

The agency knew me well, perhaps too well. They were gambling on my not causing a fuss, for just this reason. And, in this instance, they read me right.

The general also informed me that for the same reason I wouldn't be allowed to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross, awarded to me in 1957.

The second disillusionment came in April. Compared to the broken promise regarding my Air Force service, it was decidedly minor. (Many of my contemporaries in the program have retired or will become eligible for retirement in 1970 as lieutenant-colonels or better, at six to seven hundred dollars a month for life). Yet, indicative of a pattern, it was in its own way decidedly important.

On April 20, 1963, at a secret ceremony which took place in the Los Angeles area, a number of the pilots who had participated in the U-2 program were awarded the Intelligence Star, one of the Central Intelligence Agency's highest decorations.

There was one exception. Francis Gary Powers hadn't been invited.

"Kelly" Johnson and a couple other people who worked with me attended. They were very secretive about it, however, because they had been instructed not to let me know what was going on. I knew all the time, from pilot friends with whom I had kept in contact.

It was more than a slight, more than the failure to receive an award. It was confirmation of what I had half-suspected for some time, but didn't really want to admit. I was, to borrow from John LeCarré, the spy who was to stay out in the cold. Things began fitting into place: the agency's failure to clear up the misconceptions regarding my orders, and by so doing lending credence to the criticism; the canceled White House visit; the smudged clearance.

It wasn't too difficult to deduce the reasoning behind it. I could almost hear the discussion:

The public is already down on Powers because they think he told more than he should. We can't divulge what he withheld. Since he's already been made the scapegoat, why not leave it at that? Otherwise there will be questions. The agency has been under enough fire already. This will divert the criticism.

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Conjecture, of course, but I suspect it's fairly close to what happened.

As to who made the decision, I have only suspicions. As to when it occurred, it must have been sometime prior to the issuance of the clearance. That the Senate hearing went as favorably as it did was, I believe, a surprise to almost everyone concerned.

I was to be the scapegoat.

And there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Ironically, not all of the pilots who received the award had made an overflight of Russia.

While working at Langley I had met a very attractive and intelligent agency employee named Claudia Edwards Downey. Sue, as she was known to her friends, had been one of the agency people with initial doubts about Francis Gary Powers. She managed to overcome them. One of my earliest impressions of her wasn't exactly favorable: she had spilled a cup of hot coffee on me. Our romance blossomed over the wires of the Bell System. My monthly telephone bill had grown so large, in fact, that we decided there was only one way to reduce it. On October 21, 1963, Sue resigned from the agency and we were married October 26, in Catlett, Virginia. It was the beginning, without qualification, of the happiest part of my life.

After spending about six months in an apartment, we purchased a home in the Verdugo Mountains, its panoramic view including Burbank airport's north-south runway. This meant that I was only five minutes from work and Sue could watch my takeoffs and landings. The same day we made the down payment, I was informed that Lockheed was moving its testing facilities to Van Nuys airport.

But we liked the house—and have been especially fortunate in having neighbors who have become good friends.

On August 17, 1960, the Russians had given me a trial for my thirty-first birthday present. On my thirty-fifth birthday, in 1964, the California courts granted me permission to adopt Claudia Dee, Sue's seven-year-old daughter by a previous marriage. I've never had a nicer birthday present.

And on June 5, 1965, we celebrated the birth of a son, Francis Gary Powers, II.